

## The Milwaukee Fire Department Begins Its Quest to Eliminate On-the-Job Injuries

By Deputy Chief Michael Jones

For the last 136 years, the Milwaukee Fire Department has viewed injuries as normal and synonymous to the occupation. When a member was injured, he or she went on injury leave and all other department members were back to ordinary business. Today, the MFD is changing the way on-the-job injuries are viewed, and handled. The department now has a cutting-edge after action to “in the line of duty” injuries called the MFD Significant Injury Plan.

The MFD Significant Injury Plan was an idea collectively crystallized by the fire chief, the assistant fire chief, 7 deputy chiefs, and the 12 members of the Health and Safety Committee. The plan was conceived after a few department members sustained significant burn injuries that were later found to be avoidable.

Within the department, these injuries brought on an eagerness to delve into the reasons why they were occurring, and how as an organization we could better prevent them from occurring again.

The MFD began to investigate each significant injury reported by a member in 2008, and consequently, piloted the Significant Injury Plan. The plan entails looking at current protocols, recreating scenes, taking photos, and interviewing all the crewmembers, witnesses and the injured at the scene. The significant injury investigations mirror how OSHA investigates line of duty deaths.

These initial investigations began to uncover some pertinent information about why these accidents were occurring. In some situations, members were not following protocols, and in others, the equipment malfunctioned or firefighters merely were not paying attention and looking out for their own safety.

“There has been a cultural fault in the fire service that burn injuries, and injuries of all sorts, are OK,” said MFD Fire Chief Douglas Holton. “However, injuries in the fire service are not OK. They are unacceptable, and in most cases, preventable. The MFD has to begin to change the cultural climate on how we view injuries, as well as learn from our mishaps.”

The Significant Injury Plan was not created as a disciplinary action to the injured, but a way to stop other department members from sustaining the same, or more significant, injuries. In addition, the MFD is aware that occasionally unique situations arise causing someone to get hurt. For example, one of our firefighters was faced with rescuing a kid from a burning home with only one glove. The firefighter lost his other glove, but still took the calculated risk to save the child. As a result, he sustained a serious burn on the hand missing a glove.

The Significant Injury Plan calls for a set of procedures to be followed immediately after a department member is badly hurt. First, the firefighting deputy chief decides if an injury

is significant or minor. Significant injuries range from lacerations, smoke inhalation, thermal and chemical burns, or falls from a considerable distance. If the injury is identified as significant, dispatch is notified and an alert is sent to the command staff. The Incident Safety Officer on the scene then collects any evidence related to the incident, and retrieves the injured safety gear and equipment. The gear and equipment are photographed, as well as the injury scene, including, all sides of the building, the address, entryways to the building, and the main point of entry. An interior picture of the building layout and damage is also painted, as well as the spot where the member was injured.

Depending on the person's injuries, either their protective gear (all MFD members are given two sets at no cost) or equipment is sent back to the bureau from which it was received. At the bureau, the gear or equipment is meticulously inspected, and either sent back to the manufacturer, repaired, or replaced.

All people who were present at the scene of the injury—the firefighting deputy chief, battalion chief, incident safety officer, company officer, and a witness—must write a report about the incident.

After all the documentation, photos and the investigation is complete, a presentation is put together outlining the findings of the injury. It is presented to all chief officers and the MFD Health and Safety Committee. The Health and Safety Committee then develops best practices. All the information gathered from the onset of the injury is then made into a DVD. The DVD is sent to each firehouse and bureau head with a sign-off sheet; which every MFD member has to sign to confirm he or she has watched it.

“The ultimate goal of creating the Significant Injury Plan is to keep our members safe on the job. Our people are our greatest asset,” said Chief Holton. “Our department is aiming to be a world leader in firefighter safety, and eventually, want to be known as eliminating on-the-job injuries.”